Time-release analgesic drug causes fatal overdoses in United States

OxyContin (oxycodone hydrochloride) is believed to be responsible for more than 120 fatal overdoses among drug misusers in recent years in several states, including Maine, Kentucky, Virginia, and Florida.

The drug, manufactured by Purdue Pharma of Stamford, Connecticut, contains a synthetic form of morphine in a sustained-release tablet and is prescribed for chronic pain. The Food and Drug Administration approved its use in 1995. It is the leading narcotic analgesic sold in tablet form in the United States. Last year, sales exceeded $1 billion.

OxyContin's time-release formulation enables the active ingredient to work over many hours. Drug misusers discovered, however, that they could defeat the time-release design by crushing or dissolving the tablet, enabling them to snort or inject the narcotic. The government has said that no other prescription drug in the past 20 years has been so widely misused so soon after its release.

Until December of 2000, Purdue Pharma marketed the drug aggressively by paying the hotel and travel expenses of hundreds of physicians who attended weekend pain management seminars in Florida and other vacation destinations. The company has also held about 7,000 seminars around the country for physicians, including many general practitioners; these seminars advocated the use of powerful, long-acting narcotics such as oxycodone hydrochloride in pain treatment.

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Alarmed by the growing number of reports of deaths from the drug, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) made an unprecedented move by asking Purdue Pharma to limit the drug's distribution to only those specialists who regularly treat patients for chronic or severe pain.

Purdue Pharma officials said, "We expect to have ongoing, constructive dialogue with the DEA on this subject. We do not think it would be appropriate to go into any specifics at this time."